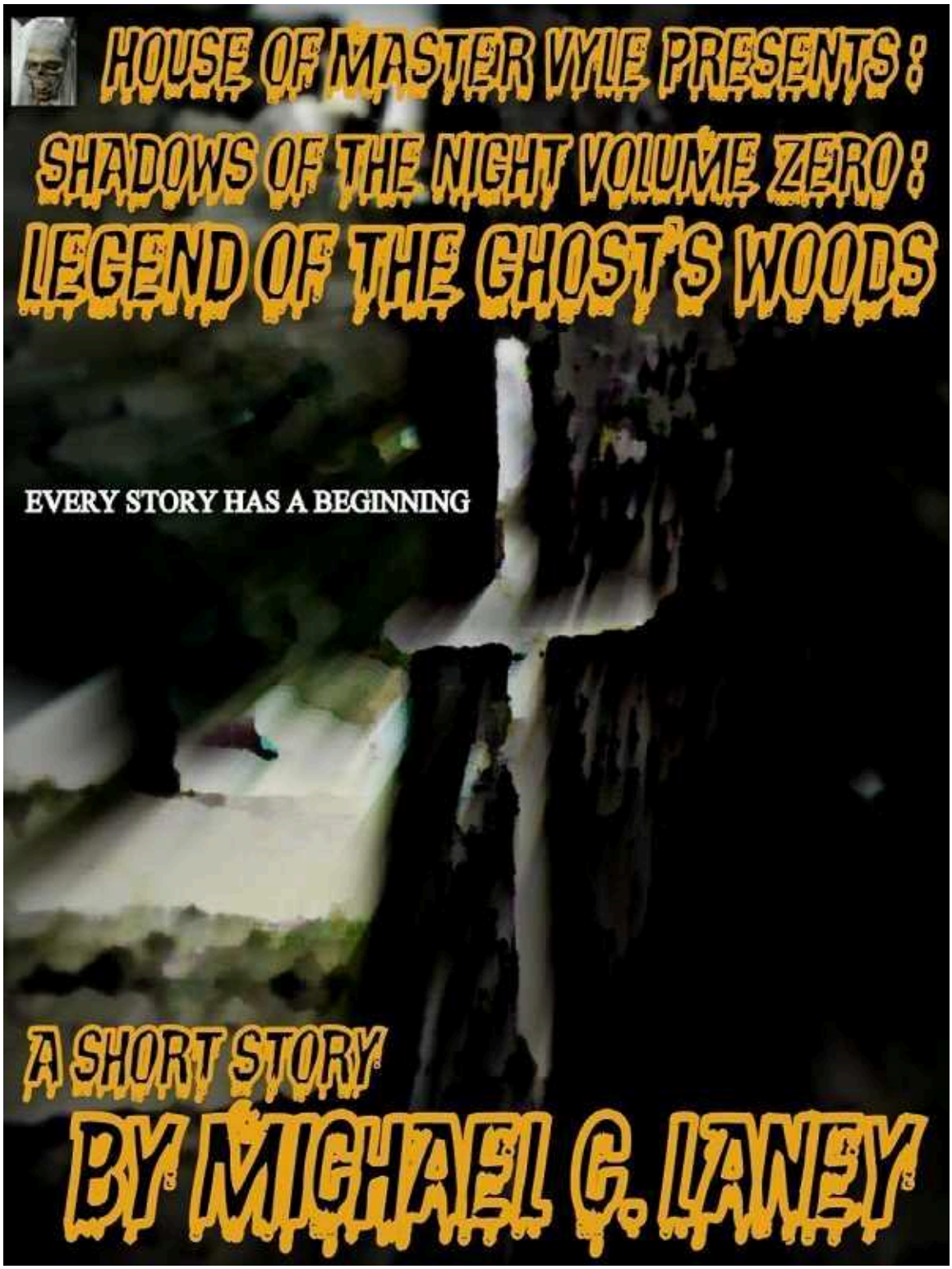
HOUSE OF MASTER VYLE PRESENTS : SHADOWS OF THE NIGHT VOLUME ZERO : LEGEND OF THE GHOST'S WOODS

EVERY STORY HAS A BEGINNING

A SHORT STORY

BY MICHAEL C. LANEY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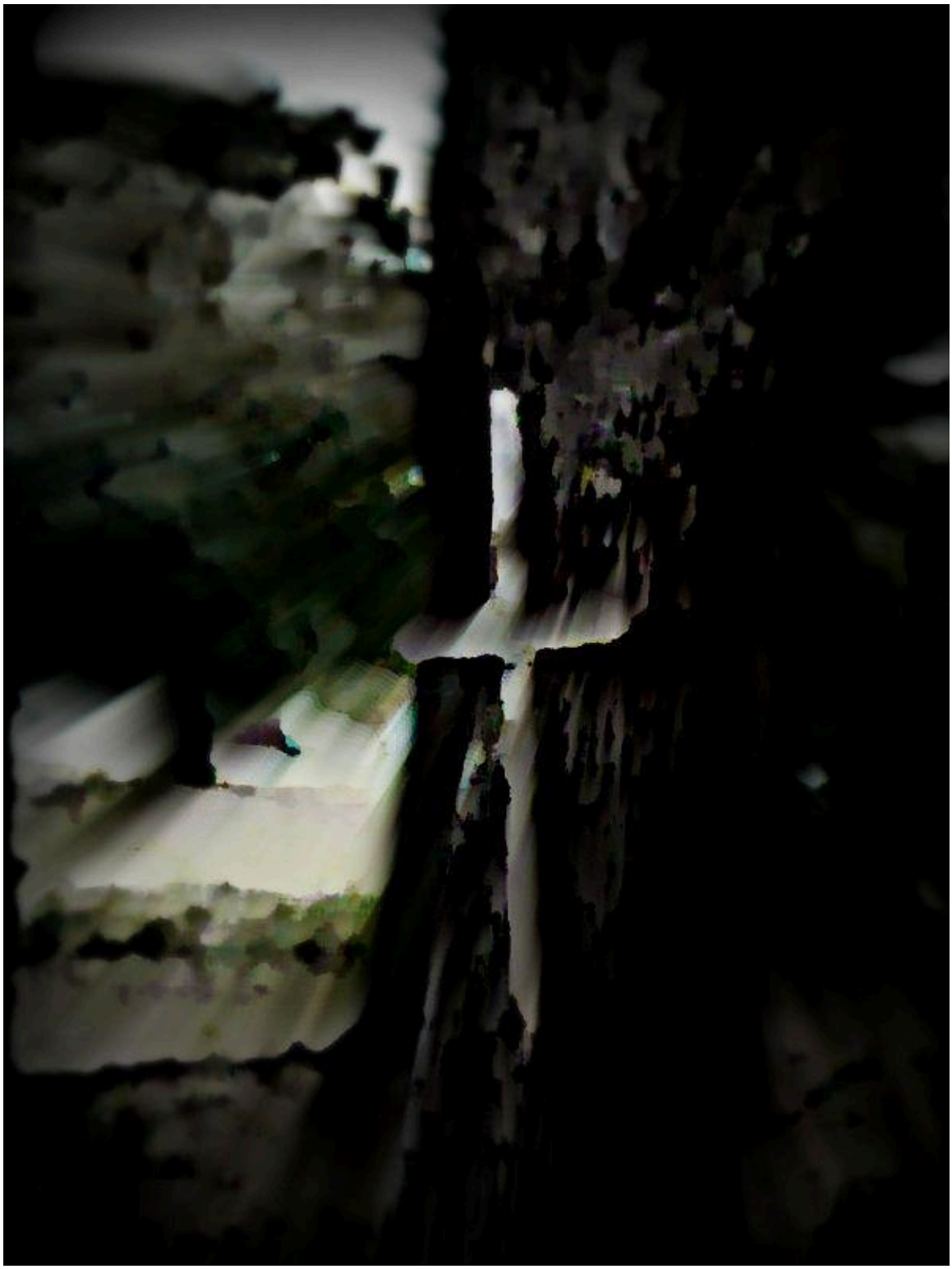

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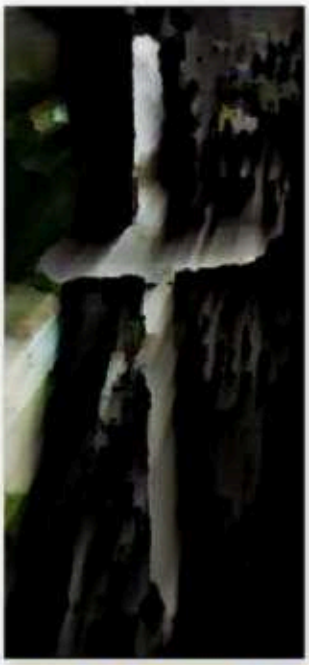

A SHORT STORY

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MICHAEL C. LANEY

Shadows Of The Night Volume Zero:
Legend Of The Ghost's Woods

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The Remembrance Tree

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To My Best Friend Scott Smith
Thanks For Pushing Me On
Someday We'll Meet Back Up

"There are places in the dark where the myriad throngs of unnamable horrors inhabit the world and where even the darkest shadows of the night dare not go."

-Abdul Alhazred
Necronomicon 1:1

8000 BC to 1879 AD

It had happened before and it was happening again. That's what the old timers say, although more in private than in public. In the 20th Century, as more and more outsiders came south and populated Ariana, the things of local legend fell into disregard, even for those who have lived long enough to know better. In the days that followed the beginning, and as searchers began to scour the woods that straddled upper Poe and lower Bennick Counties, those first whispers began. Although it remained intangible and unseen, it was quickly decided that the Monster was back.

Not only was it back, but it *had to be* back.

In the waning era of the complex but simple, when political correctness was practiced only in political arenas, and the information superhighway was a spotty as construction on Interstate 4, it had begun, but not merely a repeat of history as much as a renewal of it. Even the old timers had no idea that a dark and terrible storm was about to settle over the area, a raging hurricane of death and darkness which had settled around the Ghost's Woods in the ancient past and that was coming again. The *"Return"*, as it was sometimes called in whispers through the latter part of 1988, was merely the first event in a great many that would change the lives of several people and possibly threaten the fate of all things on a universal scale.

The seemingly unassuming center of these growing cosmic events was the small city of Ariana, Florida. Barely 110 years old Ariana had seen its share of tragedy, unusual happenings and domestic disharmony from its beginning as an idyllic retreat for the wealthy and the artistically inclined. Nearly from the beginning tragedy lived in Ariana, and it was that first event in the budding community's history, when it was still a cluster of cabins first located on the southern shores of Lake Laverna, that many say first attracted the Monster, and its wrath.

However, the Monster itself had almost been there all along. Long before the arrival of the first tribes from the north it had come, an unwanted survivor of the Great Flood. It had not come alone, but with the passage of time and as the invasion from the north was beginning the others had moved on, heading to the north and west in search of the lands from which they had been driven by a jealous, yet not very vigilant, God.

From the time of the earliest settlement by the tribes from the north the dark forests the Monster roamed were known for being the Evil Place. In that place the spirits spoke to those who could hear, and for the unwary the darkly whispered taunts were often the last things they heard, and if by chance one was to survive to hear the voices over and over they were eventually taken by madness and driven to follow the direction of those dark voices.

The people who became the earliest natives avoided the woods near the great lake, and would have passed on the knowledge to future generations; however the arrival of the Spaniards had prevented that. Decimated by disease through the early years of the conquers' occupation and relocated to the great forts of the north, the descendents who remained after the passage of several hundred years were eventually relocated a final time, to the Spanish holdings in Cuba, when the Spanish had turned Florida over to the British for possession of Havana after the end of the Seven Year's War in 1763.

For nearly 120 years, as possession of Florida passed from the British, back to the Spanish, to the Colonist and statehood, to independent republic, to member of the Confederacy and back to statehood after the Reconstruction, the evil place in the woods around the great lake and the monster which claimed them were forgotten. Occasionally a wayward hunter or traveler or group thereof would return from the area by the great lake with stories of a hairy wild man they had seen in the woods. Most of the stories were of benign encounters, where those relating the tale would speak of seeing something watching them from near the tree line or walking along the rivers and creeks that ran from the great lake. However, in the more harrowing tales, the wild man would disappear into the woods with a member of a party, neither to be seen again

and occasionally leaving its bare footprints behind as the only evidence of its passing.

Then, near the end of May of 1878, the modern settlers had come. Jonathan Lovecraft's grandfather had first mentioned the area of the great lake to him when he was in his early teens. Elias Lovecraft had surveyed the surrounding land for the state as it had worked to organize itself in the decade before the succession and the war with the North. He had helped map out the proposed division of Bennick County into two counties, and had been so taken with the area around the great lake that he found it unfair to deem it all to one county, so he had made sure half remained on the Bennick County side, while the rest sat in the area that was to become Poe County. The woods and the lake were pristine and untouched, a far cry from the grime and blandness of Boston, (at least according to his grandfather), and something about those descriptions had spoken to Jonathan Lovecraft for as long as he could remember. Married and not wanting his young daughter, Ariana, to have to live her life in the drabness, Lovecraft had begun to make plans, and convince his close and like minded friends, family members and in-laws, to relocate to the south and begin a new community, as early as 1872.

By 1876 Lovecraft had gathered a group of nearly 200 artist, artisans and farmers willing to work together to teach each other how to make an existence for the lean years of building a new community that would have to be self-sufficient, at least until steady trade could be made with other newly established communities to the north and south in Lake Trinity, Poe City and Fort Blount. It was a fairly eclectic group of writers, poets, painters, craftsmen, planters and tradesmen and their families. The group Lovecraft had convinced migrate to Poe County, Florida consisted of the refined and educated and laymen equally, and in that spirit of equality, reinforced by the continued rebuilding of the nation after the war, there was a sense of close brotherhood and optimism, no matter the calling or station of the men and women who had decided to join Lovecraft in his yet to be built utopia.

Or at least that had been the feeling before the group began to make its exodus from New England.

Armed with his grandfather's 30 year old surveying maps Jonathan had guided the group from New England to the New South in the Spring of 1878. First a large group of men, part of Lovecraft's plan to begin clearing the area around the great lake, which he named Laverna in honor of his grandmother, and to build a cluster of cabins ready to receive their families and to act as a temporary town center as the community grew, spaced out, and expanded. Even with such a sparse collection of homes Lovecraft had deemed it the Township of Ariana before the families began to arrive in the late March of 1879.

It had been during the clearing of the woods and the early construction of temporary cabins and shelters along the southeastern shore of Lake Laverna that the new settlers began to realize that they were not quite as alone as they seemed. There were mornings they would awake to find tools moved and provisions frequently ransacked, although nothing ever appeared to be taken. Then there were the occasional footprints on the ground around the cabins and in the woods along the banks of the creek which branched from the river and ran through a hollow of densely packed trees. The footprints were much larger than those of a normal man, and the theories among the first group of settlers speculated that either there was a giant living in the woods, a member of their own party was playing a trick on them, or it was a hoax by local, though yet unseen, Indians who were trying to scare them away.

Then in August of 1878 a teenaged member of the construction party, Edward Henderson, became the first person to see *"…a hairy giant of a man"* standing at the edge of the tree line and watching him while he had been taking a stroll by the creek that ran through the hollow. The creek itself would become known as Hollow Creek, and although everyone was convinced that young Edward was telling a wild tale his story was confirmed a few weeks later, when Jonathan Lovecraft's father-in-law, Thomas Thornhill, had returned to the settlement looking stricken and panicked. Thornhill told the others a similar, yet more harrowing, account to Edward Henderson's.

The respected and elder member of the party had claimed he was walking his dogs, Castor and Pollux, along the banks of the creek when they had suddenly become frightened, and after fretting and crying out they had turned and run back in the direction of the settlement. As he had turned to look back after the dogs Thornhill caught sight of something he felt was not quite a man, but was at the same time. It was standing just across the creek, on the south bank, silently watching him. Even from the other side of the water Thornhill claimed he could smell the most foul odor he had ever encountered, and knew it must have been coming from the creature. He said he moved to walk along the creek in the direction he had come, and as he did the creature had moved as well, seemingly mimicking and mirroring his steps from the other bank of the creek. When he stopped moving, frozen by fright, the creature had also stopped. Thomas Thornhill had then gathered up his courage, turning and running back in the direction he had come. There was no indication that the creature he had seen was following him, but he claimed that as he reached the edge of the hollow that it had made a sound, *"…a wailing scream that would scare the Devil himself."*

In the following days the men had searched along the south bank of the creek, but other than more footprints belonging to someone larger than a normal man they found no trace of the hairy giant that Edward Henderson or Thomas Thornhill had seen. Through the remainder of 1878 and into early January of 1879, however, sightings of the hairy giant in the woods continued. Almost always it was seen standing just within or just outside of the tree line, although at other times it had been seen in open fields, and once walking down a trail that the settlers had made for hauling the lumber they had cut to the lakeshore. Other than those few sightings of the creature in the open it was almost always seen in the area of Hollow Creek and at some point one of the men, Carl Burket, had given the creature its name, the Hollow Creek Monster.

Despite the occasional feeling of being watched, footprints in close proximity to the cabins, and the strange cries heard at rare times in the dead of night Lovecraft and his group felt they were

safe from the Monster. In fact the area was deemed to be safe enough for their families to join them so long as everyone avoided going too near the creek. In the beginning even the new arrivals seemed not to be very concerned with the strange creature in the woods. It avoided the settlers, sightings becoming even more rare as the rest of the settlers moved in. However they may not have felt as safe if they had known the reputation of the surrounding woods being the Evil Place by the region's original settlers.

Ignorant that the woods were where the spirits were supposed to be able to speak in dark and whispering voices, and complacent that the Hollow Creek Monster itself was a benign entity as curious about and as scared of them as they were of it, the residents of the fledgling town of Ariana, Florida, went about the business of everyday life and establishing ties to the surrounding communities. And as expected it was a mixture of hardship and triumph, but the ability to trade with and commune with the other residents in the surrounding area helped the settlers feel much closer to civilization. In many ways, even without a majority of the trappings of Bostonian society, those first months in the small settlement on the shore of Lake Laverna were idyllic for all, just as Jonathan Lovecraft had hoped for and promised.

Well, it was for *almost all*.

-2-

Among the group of settlers who had followed Lovecraft to Florida, and the area of the great lake he spoke of, was Otis Jessel. Otis and his family had spent their lives in the service of the Thornhill family, and Otis himself had practically grown up in the Thornhill household, and Thomas Thornhill had taken enough interest in him as a boy to make sure that he had a basic education and was treated to a standard of life above that which his parents had. For his own part Jessel had taken an interest in Miriam, Thornhill's eldest daughter. Growing up in nearly the same household they had been very close, although with the progression

of time Otis's feelings for Miriam began to become more than brotherly.

When Jessel had gotten up the courage to ask for her hand the rejection of his proposal by Thomas Thornhill had been flat and final. It had also been from that moment that Otis Jessel realized that, despite the kindness and care the patriarch of the Thornhill family had shown him all of his life, he would never be seen as an equal in the other man's eyes. The rejection had been compounded when he had suggested an elopement to Miriam and she had questioned his sanity. Miriam Thornhill herself had really had no idea that Otis had had any feelings for her at all, other than chaste or platonic ones.

The incident seemingly passed without notice after the initial shock of the proposal. Otis accepted the role of senior grounds man for Thornhill's estate, taking over his father's role later that year after he had suddenly passed. Although he never treated him any differently than he had in the past Otis Jessel always knew in his heart that Thomas Thornhill would never look at him the way he would a real son. The next spring Miriam had married Jonathan Lovecraft, and that winter Otis himself married Harriet Wick, a young woman who had begun working as a maid for the Thornhills less than a year before.

In February of 1870 Miriam Lovecraft had given birth to Ariana. Less than a week later Harriet Jessel had given birth to a daughter of her own, Jessica. The following year Jessica Jessel had been joined by a brother, Ian. In 1873 Ian and Jessica were joined by Steven. In 1876, the year of the Centennial, Harriet Jessel gave birth to another son, James. And soon after her arrival in Florida Harriet Jessel found herself with child again, Lillian, who would be born in the spring of 1880.

Jonathan and Miriam Lovecraft had not been blessed again in the years that had passed between the birth of Ariana and the relocation to Florida. But in June of 1879 came the blessed news. Nine year old Ariana would at last be getting a brother or sister. Everyone rejoiced at the good fortune of the founder of their new community in the south.

Almost everyone.

-3-

As a majority of the expatriated New Englanders worked to establish themselves as a functional and self-sufficient community they learned from their more established neighbors that there was an existence to be made from the orange citrus trees that grew wildly, mingled within the forests of pines. Thomas Thornhill had decided to establish himself and the remainder of his family a couple of miles southeast of the budding settlement. Otis Jessel had went along with his employer. The grounds man turned builder and jack of all trades went with a group to help construct a new Thornhill estate in the south, leaving his family behind at the settlement each day with the promise there would be a place for them with him there soon as well.

Occupied with the task of building a house from nothing in the middle of nowhere soon acted to further sour his feelings toward Thomas Thornhill. True, there were plenty of laborers from Lake Trinity and Poe City, and they had the ability to bring in what materials were needed and not available in the immediate area, but it seemed an extravagant waste. After all, the entire reason even Otis had wanted to come, other than to be close to Miriam was he believed in the pristine nature and untouched beauty of the area as Jonathan Lovecraft had described it second hand. To begin to replicate what they had left behind almost immediately was against everything those who had followed Lovecraft to Florida had embarked on the trip for in the first place. Then, when the news had finally reached him that Miriam Lovecraft was expecting a child, Jessel had sunk into a bitter depression, his thoughts and dreams soon haunted by a fantasy life that he had wanted for himself and never had.

Separated from his family for most of his waking hours Otis Jessel attempted to find some solace in communing with nature. Whenever he had a chance to slip away from the slowly rising structure of Ariana's, and Poe County's, first great house he would

walk into the woods. Soon he spent a great deal of time looking for excuses to slip away and to walk in the woods, becoming very unlike the diligent worker he had been for most of his life. Even in the evenings, when he began to make his way home, he would go off the regular trails and leave his wife and children waiting a bit longer, and then a bit longer, with each passing week. With each of those passing weeks his family began to notice a change in him. He had become irritable and steadily unsociable and cruel. His closest neighbors began to notice that the children, especially Jessica, were sullen and moved as if they had been hurt. Harriet Jessel herself often had dark marks on her face and arms, and she would feign ignorance as to exactly how they had gotten there when anyone asked her about them.

Otis Jessel talked to nature each time he went into the woods, and it was not too long before nature answered him back, in dark and whispering voices. They were voices which assured him that the things he felt, toward his benefactor and his fantasy love were natural. They were voices that filled his head with a steady stream of new and darker ideas.

-4-

The first great tragedy to happen in the still fledgling town of Ariana, Florida, occurred on the cool evening of September 11, 1879. After leaving the site where the new Thornhill homestead was being constructed particularly early Otis Jessel had went to the place where the voices in the woods had spoken to him the loudest and the most, an area yet to be explored by his fellow settlers, where Hollow Creek emptied into what would later become known as the Big Green Swamp. After spending a good part of the afternoon carrying out a task the voices had commanded of him he had embarked on his return to the settlement, following the creek back in the direction of home.

Almost in sight of his destination Otis Jessel saw a woman at the edge of the creek and soaking her feet in the cool water. He had no difficulty in recognizing the other person as Miriam Lovecraft. As

she noticed his approach she had smiled and waved cheerfully to him. He had felt a slight smile curling the corners of his mouth. He waved back; knowing to her he must have appeared as her childhood friend of old. Encouraged by the whispering voices he had quickened his pace, knowing what he had to do.

He had taken Miriam by surprise, the attack swift and violent. She had begged him off, crying and pleading, promising anything to make him stop for the sake of her unborn child. Miriam Lovecraft's pleas had fallen on ears which could only hear whispering voices and dark laughter. Her nose and teeth were shattered against a stone at the edge of the creek before her face was smashed and pressed into the muddy bank as Jessel ravaged her body with animalistic fury.

Only for a brief moment, after he had emptied his seed into her already occupied womb, did fear and guilt enter Otis Jessel's mind. He had leaned back, a choked sob escaping his throat as the whimpering woman he had secretly loved since childhood twisted and wept like a tiny wounded animal on the muddy creek bank. He looked to her, feeling his eyes swell as she reached back and worked weakly with one hand in a vain attempt to adjust her ruined skirts to cover herself.

The moment passed however. The voices spoke again. There was only one last thing to do.

As he had dragged her the rest of the way into the creek Miriam Lovecraft had went limp. Even as he placed a strong hand on the back of her neck and forced her head into the water she had not resisted, as if she were resigned to her fate and did not want to live the rest of her life with whatever shame she felt. Breathing heavily he had pushed her further under, waiting until he felt her life leave her. Done, he had turned her onto her back, looking into her battered face and lifeless eyes. Otis had leaned his head back, looking into the sky above the trees of the hollow and screamed with a pain and rage unlike any he had ever unleashed before. And as he did, somewhere in the distance, the Hollow Creek Monster tore loose with a demonic scream of its own.

All around him the dark voices had laughed. With a last look at Miriam's dead and battered face he had let go, and watched with a

slight fascination as the weak current of the creek pulled her away from him and further into the hollow.

The sound of another cry, however, brought him back from the place the dark whispers had taken him and into a sense of reality. Otis glanced back to the edge of the hollow and realized he was not alone. Standing closely together, a basket of wildflowers overturned at their feet, were Jessica Jessel and Ariana Lovecraft. He called to them, knowing it was already too late, his daughter and the daughter of the woman he had just murdered had at the very least watched as he had drowned her in the creek. They turned and ran screaming back to the settlement. Jessel had trudged out of the water intent on pursuing them, but with better footing and a better lead the two nine year old girls had created a huge gap between them.

Knowing he could not possibly catch them Jessel had went back into the creek, crossing to the south bank. Once on the other side he ran deeper into the hollow, intent on reaching the secret spot. He even nearly reached his destination when the sound of limbs snapping had suddenly startled him, causing him to freeze dead in his tracks. As he had felt his heart pounding in his throat he had heard the sound of a low growl, just as the first faint hints of a terrible and musky odor reached his nostrils.

Shaking, Jessel turned to see a dark shape standing within the trees of the hollow, not three strides from him. He had looked from the bare and oversized feet and up its black hair covered body to the face, finally settling on its eyes, its horrible eyes.

No. It was not fair. It was just not fair. He had done all *they* had asked of him, done all the things *they* had told him to do.

However, just like Miriam Lovecraft, Jessel found himself resigned to his fate. He stood, making no attempt to run or fight back as the Hollow Creek Monster stepped toward him.

-5-

Back at the settlement the news had spread as soon as the two girls had run screaming into Stanley Janeway. A search party had

been quickly assembled, and it had taken less than an hour before a broken Jonathan Lovecraft pulled his wife's body from the creek and held her to him, sobbing into her chest. At first the searchers had found no trace of Otis Jessel. His decomposing and partially eaten body was found several weeks later, not too far from the site of the Thornhill homestead, and it was almost immediately accepted that Jessel had been killed by the Hollow Creek Monster, despite that fact that up to that point the creature had not harmed any of the settlers. The two frightened girls had heard its cry coming in apparent answer to Otis's own scream.

What the searchers did find that evening, as dusk settled, was the secret place Jessel had kept in the woods.

On the south bank of the creek, as it expanded and further calmed into a foreboding and fetid expanse of swampland, the thinning trees of the hollow had been cleared away. In the middle of the cleared area five stones, each roughly waist high, had been arranged into a circle several feet across. In the center of the circle was a similar stone, with a fairly flat and smooth top. On top of the stone sat a jagged chunk of crystal, roughly the size of a man's palm. On the side of the stone which faced back in the direction of the creek and its source, a single strange and unknown word had been inscribed in large letters.

A quick examination of the area revealed that the six trees closest to the area each had one of the letters from the unknown word deeply carved into them. Although they could not fathom the meaning or the purpose of what they had found the one thing all of the men agreed on was that it was not meant to serve God. They had also decided that their search for Otis Jessel would go no further, because if the Hollow Creek Monster had a lair it was most certainly among the tall cypresses in the swamp beyond.

1879 to 1880

In the wake of his wife's murder Jonathan Lovecraft became the first person to abandon the settlement on Lake Laverna. With the aid of his in-laws he had begun to search for a new location in which to start over, someplace far enough from where Miriam had died so he would never have to be close to the spot he had brought her to with the promise of a new life. Several miles to the south was another great lake closer to the trails which lead to Fort Blount. Lovecraft had named the lake Ariana, again in honor of his daughter, and soon he, like his father-in-law, began to hire in workers from the neighboring communities to help build a family residence of his own.

Without him the Township of Ariana continued on, and its residents soon began to explore the area east of Lake Laverna. Guided and directed by those who had settled near the area before them they determined that there were great tracts of land suitable for the cultivation of citrus fruit, an endeavor that Thomas Thornhill and his oldest son, Edmond, began to take an increasing interest in. And for a little while the tragedy of Miriam Lovecraft's death began to be forgotten.

That was until Jessica Jessel saw her in the woods in December of 1879. With Otis Jessel dead his family had done their best to make due, and Jessica and her mother had begun to make an existence repairing the clothes of the workmen at the Thornhill homestead, and offering what fruits they could scavenge to sell. And it was on a trip to the site of the great house that Jessica Jessel had encountered a woman weeping in the woods, arm thrown across her face and leaning against a young, live oak, tree. She had approached the woman to ask her what was the matter when the woman turned her face up to her to reveal that she was the same woman that her father had murdered a couple of months before.

Initially the other residents of Ariana had thought the girl had become unhinged. She had, after all, witnessed her own father drowning her playmate's mother in the creek. But, like Edward

Henderson before her when he had first reported seeing the Hollow Creek Monster, her sighting of Miriam Lovecraft was confirmed by others. People walking in the woods would encounter the weeping woman, who either disappeared or turned into a ball of light that changed colors once she realized she had been seen. In some accounts she was said to be cradling a naked infant who appeared to be lifeless, but in a majority of them she was alone, usually with an arm thrown up over her face and leaning on that arm against a tree as she wept.

As with the initial appearance of the Monster, the ghost of Miriam Lovecraft was seen as a benign spirit. In fact, other than her crying, she made no sound, nor did she attempt to speak to anyone who encountered her once she had been seen. As Christmas approached that year there were accounts that the ball of light she was said to become could be seen at night, hovering around the edge of the hollow and very close to the vicinity to where she had died.

Jessica Jessel soon began visiting the tree where she had first seen Miriam. Each day she would offer a prayer of forgiveness for her father and her family from the woman she had witnessed him kill. Occasionally she would leave a small offering. Sometimes it was the best piece of orange fruit she could find, or a bit of bread, and even candles to help her light her way so that she could reach Heaven. To further mark the spot Jessica had taken two pieces of wood and fashioned them into a cross which she nailed to the tree. With the passage of time others would occasionally stop at the tree and leave candles for Miriam as well, and soon the townspeople spoke of it as the Remembrance Tree.

-7-

In the weeks following Christmas the Hollow Creek Monster suddenly returned to the area of the settlement. Very quickly it became apparent that the creature was no longer a shy entity that was afraid of and curious about the settlers. One night, as what seemed to be every dog in the settlement on Lake Laverna cried and

wailed, the Monster had raided the smokehouse. The morning after several dogs were found dead throughout the settlement, their necks broken.

This new aspect of the Monster only strengthened the belief that it had killed Otis Jessel. In the early weeks of 1880 the Monster was sighted more often, and at times far from the creek, once even at the northern end of the lake. It stole the handle from the pump of a well outside one of the cabins at the edge of the settlement. Food and livestock were stolen in the dead of night, sometimes accompanied by the unearthly cries of the Monster. Finally those who worked outside often felt as if they were being carefully scrutinized by the unseen creature, and sometimes that feeling was accompanied by a foul and musky odor.

It was in the middle of February of 1880 that the Hollow Creek Monster claimed its first, confirmed, human victim. Sara Hatley and Edith Bozeman, two girls in their early teens, had taken a group of younger children to an area west of the lake, to a spot where wild blackberries grew, to pick berries and help keep the younger children entertained. After they had been in the spot for a couple of hours the two older girls had found a place to sit and watch as the younger children had filled baskets with berries and played hide-and-go-seek among the brambles and bushes. As they had watched the Monster had suddenly, and without warning, appeared through the bushes of the thicket. While the children screamed and scattered Sara and Edith had watched in frozen horror as the creature had reached out with one hand and snatched three year old Abigail Saunders up by her dress and disappeared back into the thicket.

Again a search was quickly organized, but no trace was found of the little girl or her monstrous abductor. Over the course of the next few months the Hollow Creek Monster would claim other victims. Lucy Butler would be snatched from within the settlement itself as she stepped out the door of her cabin to call her children in for supper. Nicholas Janeway, the 13 year old son of Stanley Janeway, would be grabbed by the Monster as he and a group of friends hunted in the woods on the eastern side of Lake Laverna. Martha Kelsey, an infant, was snatched through the window of her parents'

cabin as they watched the lightning quick incident with no chance to react. Finally, Sara Hatley, who had witnessed Abigail Saunders's abduction, was dragged screaming from the edge of the Laverna River, grabbed from behind as she and her mother had scrubbed clothes, and taken across open ground toward the hollow.

There were several witnesses to the abduction of Sara Hatley, including Stanley Janeway who, still stricken by grief and rage at the loss of his son, had quickly taken up arms and followed the girl's screams into the woods with several of his fellow settlers hot on his heels. The party had pressed deep into the woods, once again going as far as the swamp before Sara's cries were silenced, before grudgingly giving up the search.

Later that same night the Monster returned, going on a rampage through the settlement. It killed several more dogs as it raged among the cabins. It broke windows and ripped the door off the cabin where Harriet Jessel and her children cowered as it menaced them before moving on to overturn a wagon sitting at the cabin of Gregory Cutler. Moving further into the settlement it had destroyed a water barrel and butter churn outside of the Maguire's cabin.

As it moved into a dusty street Stanley Janeway had suddenly appeared, charging toward the carnage on horseback. As the Monster had screamed its unearthly and rage filled cry the horse had reared up as Janeway attempted to take aim at it with his Winchester rifle. With inhuman strength the eight foot Monster had simply reached up and grabbed Janeway's horse by the muzzle and with a twist had broken the rearing creature's neck. The horse's sudden collapse had taken Janeway by surprise and he had fallen with it, his right leg snapping under the weight of his mount. As the Monster had stood over him Janeway still had enough of his faculties to quickly shift his weapon around and pull the trigger.

The explosion of the shot echoed into the night, followed by the Hollow Creek Monster's scream of rage and pain. As Janeway worked to scramble from beneath the weight of his dead horse the Monster had turned and run back through the settlement as other residents baring torches and lanterns came to Janeway's aid.

In the light of the next day another party made their way into the woods, following the trail of the Monster's blood along the southern bank of Hollow Creek. Again the trail ended, or more correctly was not followed, at the circle of stones which marked the beginning of the vast swamp that the creek drained into.

Shortly thereafter the settlers had decided to abandon the area they had worked for nearly the past two years to make their own on the southern shore of Lake Laverna. A few, including the Hendersons, the Flynts and the Pringles eventually relocated a couple of miles to the north of the great lake and into Bennick County, where they established the small community of Racine. There were several who had had enough harrowing experiences in the Florida woods who decided to return to the north, many returning to Boston, while some, like the Saunders, only went as far as Georgia and the Savannah area. Though the vast majority went south, settling around Lake Ariana and still believing in the idea of the ideal community that Jonathan Lovecraft had promised them in the beginning. Seemingly in a place that the Monster had no interest in Thomas Thornhill and his family stayed on, reliant on labor from Poe City and Winter Retreat to complete their new family home.

Stanley Janeway, the apparent hero of the Hollow Creek Monster's rampage in 1880, eventually became the first official mayor of Ariana, Florida, once the town center had been firmly established just to the south of the shores of Lake Ariana. The survivors of the Jessel family, settled on the edge of town, finding the promise of a place of their own in and near the Thornhill Estate broken. Their patriarch seen by many as the one who had brought disaster to the settlement, they were shunned to a great extent in Ariana's early days and even into the present fell further down the social scale of the city's residents.

The last residents to leave the original settlement had been the Kelseys. For several months Jane Kelsey, despondent over the loss of her baby daughter, refused to leave, firmly believing that Martha was still alive and would be returned to her. As he kept the vigil with his wife it was apparent to Virgil Kelsey that, as some had hoped,

that the Monster had not went off to die. Sometimes in the night its unearthly wail could be heard in the distance, coming from the direction of Hollow Creek. And some nights, as he sat awake in the corner of their cabin, clutching a rifle close to him, he could hear grunts and heavy breathing coming from outside. Once, as Jane had tossed and moaned in a fevered and fitful sleep, he had heard it on the porch of the cabin, the weight of its footsteps causing the planks to protest and groan. Mornings there would be further evidence of the Monster's visits, it's huge and bare footprints all around the ground outside the cabin.

At last he had convinced Jane it was best to join the others in the south before they were reunited with their baby girl in ways they did not want to be. The morning they left Virgil took his knife and carved a single word into the wooden timbers of the cabin door. Like the others who had been in the party that had attempted to track down Otis Jessel he had no idea of what the word meant, but he hoped that it would act as warning and a sign that this was a territory that no man was meant to be in.

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1880 to 1957

Times changed and the world moved on. As the City of Ariana became firmly established more families from inside and outside of Central Florida came to settle and with them they began to bring the first trappings of business and industry. Elliot and Graham Ellison, two brothers from Chicago, had brought their families to Ariana and opened the first apothecary in the growing town center. The Davenports had come from Georgia and Alabama, many of them skilled carpenters and builders who quickly organized a small building company and established a mill on the northern border of

the county before budding into other fields of labor. The Marshes had descended from Tallahassee and with their money and influence had helped bring the rails of the Seaboard Coastline Rail Road through Central Florida. The Bloodworsts, another group of New Englanders, this time from Maine, and with a background in shipping, had established a trading company that would become an over-the-road shipping company by the 1920's. And at the beginning of the 1930's the Wentworths had come, opening the first in what would become a chain of department stores in Ariana.

The founding families had done well for themselves as well. The Lovecrafts and the Thornhills had gotten heavily involved in the citrus trade and cultivation, which by the 1940's had boomed into a fully fledged business and brought industry to Ariana as well as two newer communities to the east and west, Sun Acres and Lake Parker respectively. The Bozemans, with the influx of new residents, had been able to revive the law practice they had abandoned to leave Boston and follow Jonathan Lovecraft to Florida.

However, along with the influx of new settlers and families came the erosion of the idyllic community that had been part of Jonathan Lovecraft's original dream. Although it became a mix of cultures and creeds Ariana was a far cry from being a utopian society of like minded people working together in the spirit of brotherhood and equality. Within a scant few years the initial Bostonian settlers had become mixed and entwined with the ideas and ideals of Southern culture. Within less than two generations those who were the descendents of the settlers from New England were so well blended into the mix with their southern brethren that anyone on the outside looking in would be totally unaware of their *"Yankee"* heritage. In fact the later descendents, many increasingly ignorant of their early origins, would toss about the epithet of Yankee faster than a *"True Southerner"* would.

Industry as well as ignorance would lead to further expansion and exploration of the area. In fact by the 1920's the Big Green Swamp and the area around Lake Laverna were often frequented by local hunters. Its reputation as being haunted and somewhat spooky had not went away. In fact the area around the great lake

had been named the Ghost's Woods, as colorful floating balls of light and will-'o-the-wisps were often seen in the woods after nightfall, a testament to the fact that Miriam Lovecraft's sprit still roamed among the trees lamenting her fate and that of her unborn child.

The ghost of Miriam Lovecraft was still not the only restless entity who roamed the forest and timberland north of Ariana and the northern part of the county. The Hollow Creek Monster was still, at the very least, a presence in that unclaimed region. The occasional sightings of the hairy wild man were still reported from time to time, but once again the encounters were often glimpses from a distance and often considered benign. Even as the 20th Century began the majority of sightings of the creature were along the banks of Hollow Creek and in the Big Green Swamp.

Usually the most harrowing stories were told by hunters in the swamp, who swore that they at times could hear footsteps echoing their own as they moved, as if someone were trying to mimic and mirror their own footfalls in much the same way that Thomas Thornhill had described the creature doing when he had encountered it on the banks of the creek in 1878. Other times it would cross the road ahead of a vehicle, especially at one particular spot, a dangerous curve on Appaloosa Road, near where Edmond Thornhill had established Camp Ember in 1925, a summer riding camp for girls. And of course some of the locals joked that it was probably not a good idea to have an equestrian camp in the vicinity since the Monster apparently had no problem killing horses as it had done the night it had taken down Stanley Janeway's horse during its infamous rampage in 1880.

At least locally the Monster had gained legendary status. Some sightings, as time went on, were attributed to people seeking to bring attention to themselves. Throughout the 1920's and into the 1950's there were more and more reports of the Hollow Creek Monster seen outside of its normal setting. Not only was it seen in the woods in northern Poe and southern Bennick Counties, but it had also been sighted in fields and groves and crossing roads as far east as western Poe City and as far south as New Wales in the

southern corner of Poe County. The monster had also been sighted in Orange, Hodder and Osceola Counties as well, and it was these sightings that gave rise to some speculation that either there were more false reports, or there was more than one monster.

Then, after a time, sightings of the monster stopped. Last seen walking along the creek by a group of thrill seeking teenagers who had been determined to see the remains of the original settlement no matter what the consequences in the fall of 1957 the Hollow Creek Monster seemingly vanished and showed no further trace once a party had searched the surrounding woods to verify their claim. Many believed the group's story was a hoax, like many of the sightings that had been reported in far flung areas over the past several years. Some even when as far as to speculate that the Monster was at last dead.

However legends, real or otherwise, rarely die.

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1966

Of the events that transpired on the stretch of Wamport Road, less than a mile from the southern bank of Hollow Creek and four miles from the Thornhill Estate, in April of 1966 there were only two living people who knew what really happened. It was kept as a closely guarded secret, and no one ever suspected these two seemingly different and unlikely individuals of knowing the truth behind the mystery. What had become of Ariana Police Chief Clement Brickman and department store heiress Jean Wentworth-Fox was something woven into those local legends, and a subject for speculation and theory on and off as the years went on. Some people believed that they had been having an affair and run off together, despite the fact that many people believed that Jean Wentworth-Fox had been looking for a way to make the police chief step down so that her oldest son, Bryant, could be given the job, despite his young age. Others believed that she had simply stopped on the side of the road and went into the woods for some reason,

and later that Brickman found her abandoned vehicle and followed her trail into the woods, where they had both eventually been swallowed up by them, as with many others before them. Still, only two anonymous people knew the truth, and for 22 years they had not come close to telling anyone.

The details of the great mystery were often debated, but the facts, what few they were, were simple. Jean Wentworth-Fox's 1966 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme and Clement Brickman's patrol car, a 1962 Studebaker Lark that had also acted as the Ariana Police Chief's personal vehicle, were both found pulled onto the shoulder of Wamport Road and both facing north. The two abandoned vehicles were less than a mile south of a small bridge that straddled Hollow Creek. Neither driver had taken anything from their vehicles, other than a blanket kept in the trunk of the patrol car for first aid purposes. (Those who suspected they had run off together had a pretty good idea of what the missing blanket may have been used for.)

Although it was not an opinion voiced to the press a majority of the locals were sure that Brickman and Wentworth-Fox had been taken by the Hollow Creek Monster. Searchers had found no evidence of the Monster, not even a single footprint. And as they had searched the woods no one claimed to have seen the Monster, or felt its eyes on them, but by the same token that did not mean that it was not still there.

A search of the Ghost's Woods, while turning up no sign of either the missing police chief or heiress did reveal one thing. On the southern bank of the creek, where it drained into the Big Green Swamp, the strange circle of stones erected by Otis Jessel in 1879 remained standing, as well as the six trees that were each marked with one of the letters from the strange word inscribed on the center stone. Everything was still there, just as it had been described when the original settlers had discovered it 87 years before, with one exception. The strange crystal shard said to be sitting on top of the center stone was missing.

Acting, and shortly thereafter full-time, Police Chief Nick Boswell had ordered the area photographed. Although not a crime scene, or

even suspected of being one, Boswell did realize, considering the area's reputation, that it was unlikely that the opportunity to document the stone circle would come again anytime soon. Despite the fact that the search of the Ghost's Woods had yielded no evidence of any kind Boswell would revisit the area many times throughout his tenure as Ariana Police Chief. Once, asked why he had so diligently kept on the case for nearly eight years without a lead, Boswell had commented that he felt that both the Wentworth and Brickman families deserved to know what had happened to their loved ones. Although the actual truth was that he had his own motivation for wanting to solve the great mystery.

Again, as with most unexplained occurrences in Ariana, the old timers were certain that the Hollow Creek Monster was at its heart. In places like Ariana secrets are hard to keep. Eventually someone with knowledge lets some small bit of information slip out, some little tidbit that eventually leads to someone either guessing or realizing the truth. However those two individuals who knew the truth about what had become of Clement Brickman and Jean Wentworth-Fox were more secretive and tight lipped than most, securely guarding their knowledge for the next 22 years.

Then in August there came the first report of the Monster since 1957. It had come on the heels of Curtis and Ruby Davenport, who had been out on a drive with two of their children, finding a truck turned on its side and in the ditch just around the dangerous curve on Appaloosa Road. Several yards down the road from the wrecked truck Curtis Davenport had spotted the prone form of Winona Jessel laying half out of a water filled ditch. Sending his wife and children up the road to find help Davenport had remained with the unconscious woman, looking uneasily into the woods around him as he awaited their return and the arrival of an ambulance.

Several days later Winona Jessel had awakened screaming from her apparent coma in Sun Acres General Hospital. In the days following her return to the world of the living she had been visited by Nick Boswell and Officer Jonard Sink, who had listened to her version of events. She said she had been driving along Appaloosa Road late on Saturday night, although she did not say where she

had been coming from. Being a Jessel the men both suspected she had been returning to Ariana from a small brothel on the outskirts of Racine where it was rumored she conducted a little weekend business. The Monster, she claimed, had been standing in the path of the truck and had actually raised its arms as if it were going to charge her, even as she lost control of her truck to avoid hitting it.

Winona's tale became more harrowing, and slightly more unbelievable, as new elements were added to what had been known as the Monster's established habits. She had claimed that it had screamed and had beaten its fists against the sides of the truck. Then it had broken out the front windshield and pulled her from the wreckage, carrying her into the woods. After walking deeper into the woods, apparently in the area of Great Spirit Lake, not too far from Camp Ember, Winona Jessel claimed that the monster had thrown her to the ground and forced itself on her. She had lost consciousness as the Monster had had its way with her, and she had not awakened until after she had found herself in the hospital room.

As with many of the tales from the 1920's on there was a mix of those who believed Winona Jessel's account, and those who believed it was a fabrication. There had been extensive damage to the side of her truck, but nothing that seemed inconsistent with it having been rolled several times before it had ended up in the ditch. The windshield had been broken, but also no doubt as a result of the crash, broken by her ejection from the cabin and being thrown to the spot in which the Davenports had found her. Known for being an alcoholic as well as a prostitute Winona's account was thought by many to be the product of a dream she had in her coma mixed with things from reality, her knowledge of her family's past mixed with an encounter with some big and burly John who played the part of the Hollow Creek Monster in her nightmare.

Despite being disregarded by many, including the authorities, Jessel's tale was added to the legend of the Monster. It also gave weight to the speculation that the Monster was involved in the disappearance of Clem Brickman and Jean Wentworth-Fox.

Winona Jessel, her legs injured in the accident, and in the apparent abduction which followed it, was given a wheelchair when

she was released to return home. From 1966 on she spent much of her time, sitting at the edge of the small lot her trailer sat on at the Shady Oaks Trailer Park in her wheelchair, harassing her neighbors as she smoked and drank, often scaring small children with rambling warnings about the Hollow Creek Monster, and how sometimes it would come all the way from the Ghost's Woods to walk among the trailers in search of bad children. There was no doubt she had become unhinged by her experience, whether real or imagined. Through the years her neighbors had called the police to her residence to quell her ranting, but each visit usually resulted in her being restrained by one of her daughters, and eventually her granddaughter, Michelle. Not equipped to deal with the handicapped the members of the Ariana Police Department had chosen to leave her at home to sleep off whatever she had gotten into to really get her going. There were also rumors that despite her handicap Jessel still conducted a little occasional "business" to support herself and her family in addition to what the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services had given them to live on.

The Monster's single encounter was enough to insure that it would not be forgotten, despite the fact that it once again became a dormant and benign entity. The strange feeling of being watched and perhaps followed was reported by hunters who went into the Ghost's Woods and the Big Green Swamp, but they never brought with them stories of sightings of the creature. However, as in the past, it seemed that the Hollow Creek Monster was only waiting for some moment of its own choosing to unleash terror and violence upon the people of Ariana.

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1979

It was the centennial year of the City of Ariana, Florida, that the Hollow Creek Monster made its dramatic return after not having been actually reported seen for nearly 13 years. In late April, as preparations for the celebration were beginning for a month long

festival in June, given the name Super Summer ’79, a call had come in to the Ariana Police Department about a hairy wild man who had taken a child from his home on the northeastern limits of the city.

Ariana Police Chief Patrick Holland had driven out with Officer Jonard Sink to the lonely house which sat on several acres of land off of Bascome Road where a distraught Deidre Ruby related her tale. She had been in her kitchen preparing for lunch when her husband, Cal, had come running in, telling her in panicked tones that he had just seen a huge man covered with hair scoop up their son, Brian, from the edge of their property and disappear into the woods. Her husband had then gotten his shotgun from the bedroom and run into the woods in pursuit. After several hours and they had still not returned she had called the police.

Patrick Holland was a local, and a good old boy, who had grown up hearing the tales of the Hollow Creek Monster, but he considered them just tales and did not put too much stock in the monster story from the beginning, especially considering that Deidre Ruby had not seen the *“huge, hairy man”* herself. Still, he did his duty. After calling back to the station and gathering up some more men he had begun a search of the woods around the Ruby property that lasted for two weeks, but did not turn up either a trace of the missing boy or his father. He had also humored the distraught mother, offering joint interviews with her to *The Ariana Star*, *The Poe Examiner* and *The Lake Parker Ledger* in which she had recounted her missing husband’s claim and Holland had given details of the first days of the search. The front page of *The Star* that week had displayed a bold headline which proclaimed, HOLLOW CREEK MONSTER ABDUCTS LOCAL BOY, FATHER.

In the end, after learning that the Rubys had been having marital problems, and that Deidre Ruby had actually filed for divorce from her husband a couple of weeks prior to his disappearance, Police Chief Holland had determined that Cal Ruby had taken his son and fled, no doubt with the assistance of some unknown third party. Ruby, he was sure, had told his wife the monster story to keep her occupied as he made his escape. Despite the Hollow Creek Monster’s legendary reputation of disappearing into the woods with

a victim never to be seen again Holland's theory was generally accepted, even by the long time residents of Ariana.

However, in a few short weeks, the Monster would be involved in yet another apparent abduction case.

On the evening of Saturday, June 2, the second day of Super Summer '79, a man by the name of Everett Reese had crashed his psychedelic painted Volkswagen van into a gnarled live oak when he had swerved off the infamous *"dead man's"* curve on Appaloosa Road to avoid hitting a *"huge, hairy man"* standing in the middle of road. Reese claimed when he had gotten out of the van to inspect the damage, along with his girlfriend, a 13 year old runaway named Becky Powell (who had rechristened herself Willow at some point during her journey with Reese). The man, who *"reeked of the grave"*, had suddenly reappeared from the woods and had grabbed Powell, retreating into the woods with the screaming girl as Reese watched helplessly.

Patrick Holland had not believed Reese's story of course. He was a pot smoking "hippie" who had been transporting runaway jailbait back and forth across state lines. "Willow" Becky Powell's distraught parents, residents of the State of Pennsylvania, and who had no knowledge of the Hollow Creek Monster, had not believed Reese's account either. Nor had the State of Florida. Obviously the 32 year old dope fiend and child rapist had murdered his young companion and dumped her body somewhere in the woods, possibly in some other county, or even another state, before crashing his hippie bus while in a drug induced haze. Reese was given a fairly swift date with Old Sparky, even beating Ted Bundy to the chair despite the fact that his trial had taken place the year after Bundy's, and on the last day of May, 1988, Theodore Robert Bundy was still at Strake Prison, awaiting to meet his maker while Everett Reese grew colder in the ground.

Despite the convictions of Patrick Holland and the State of Florida the idea that two abductions had occurred near the Ghost's Woods where the perpetrator had been described in both cases by unrelated people as a huge and hairy man meant only one thing to

the residents of Ariana, Florida. The Hollow Creek Monster was back!

Not only did the old timers in Ariana believe that the Monster had returned to continue the strange vengeance it had begun nearly 100 years before, but also a vast segment of people from outside of Florida. Over the past few years *"Bigfoot Fever"* had swept America, and as the story began to circulate about the possibility of a Sasquatch stalking the woods of Central Florida it had brought hunters, trackers, thrill seekers and the curious in droves and had turned the Super Summer '79 celebration into a circus.

Within days frantic calls and reports of sightings had inundated law enforcement phone lines across the Five Counties Area. The Super Summer '79 celebration had quickly become the Bigfoot Festival, and a city which had hoped to avoid that first and dark chapter in its history found it dredged up and distorted for nearly two months on the evening news. The Monster itself was now known in the national media as the Ariana Skunk Ape and the Bennick County Bigfoot, and one intrepid t-shirt salesman had even been bold enough to sell a box of hastily made iron-on transfer shirts with the silhouette of the monster gripping the silhouette of a horse on a yellow road sign surrounded by the caption, HOLD YOUR HORSES: ARIANA SKUNK APE CROSSING AHEAD!

Without the insight to cash in on the Bigfoot fervor while it had the chance the city had looked for someone to blame on ruining the centennial celebration, and it was decided rather quickly that the Doubting Thomas, Patrick Holland, who did not even believe in the Hollow Creek Monster, was the perfect scapegoat for their anger. After all it had been Holland who had allowed Deidre Ruby to talk to the papers about her son's abduction and joined her in giving statements of his own. Additionally Reese's brother, Norman, had come to find a way to back up his brother's claim that a monster had abducted Becky Powell and was left by Holland to investigate on his own, eventually disappearing himself. Plus Winona Jessel, had given several ranting interviews to the press about her experience 13 years earlier, and sometimes after the interviews she had been so wound up that the police had been called to deal with her, although

they continued with their normal practice of getting her into her trailer as opposed to bringing her to the station downtown. So Holland had found himself suddenly fired from the Ariana Police Department, and Jonard Sink was chosen as his replacement, a position he would only hold for the next two years until he retired from law enforcement.

By the end of August, as the new school year had begun, reports of sightings of the Monster had dwindled to zero. The Super Summer '79 celebration had been over for almost two months, and in the weeks following the end of the festival the monster hunters and the press had moved on to other monster sightings and more important news stories. Despite the Hollow Creek Monster's disappearance the specter of death lingered on in the city of Ariana.

It had happened before, and it was happening again.

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On Tuesday, September 11, 1979, concerned neighbors of Bryant and Christine Fox had called the Ariana Police Department with the report of *"blood curdling"* screams coming from the Fox home on Berkley Road. The two responding officers, Frank Hawkins and William Fronton, stepped into a hell of blood and gore. The eight month pregnant Christine Fox, a descendent of Carl Burket, who had given the Monster its name, and the daughter of former Ariana Mayor Walter Greer, was naked and laid out on the bare kitchen table, hands and feet bound to the legs of the table, a single jagged cut running from the hollow of her neck to rise of her Mons Venus. In the living room the two officers encountered the Foxes' 15 year old son, Dennis, his clothes soaked in blood and the naked baby cradled in his arms as he sat in a rocking chair humming '*Rock-A-Bye Baby'.*

Dennis Fox was found clinically insane by the doctors and placed in the Maxwell Mental Hospital in Hodder County. He had claimed that his friends had told him that his mother was smothering the baby inside her, planning to kill it as soon as it was born, so *they* had told him how to save the baby. When asked who his friends

were Dennis Fox had told his doctors and the police that they were *"wise and invisible".* He told them that they lived in the woods behind his house and that they talked to him in whispers that no one else could hear.

The fact that a woman and her unborn child were murdered 100 years to the day that Miriam Lovecraft and her unborn child were murdered was not lost on the long time residents of Ariana. The fact that she was a descendent of the man who had named the Hollow Creek Monster was another fact not quickly forgotten. Her husband, the son of a woman who had disappeared 13 years earlier, had left Ariana shortly after the death of his wife in much the same way the Jonathan Lovecraft had fled the settlement by the Lake 100 years before.

It had happened before and it was happening again.

-12-

A month and a half later death would again visit the City of Ariana. In the predawn hours of Thursday, November 1, a pair of men on their way to work at the Thornhill Packing House called to report what appeared to be a body lying in a ditch on East Derby Avenue, just across from the beginning of Hobbs Lane. The first officer to respond on the scene, William Fronton, confirmed that there was a body in the ditch, a woman who appeared to be in her mid to late 20s, severely beaten, strangled and naked with the exception of a pair of orange socks on her feet. For the first couple of days the Jane Doe had been given the nickname of the Orange Socks Lady, until a missing person's inquiry placed by Winona Jessel lead to the dead woman being identified as her oldest daughter, Wendy.

Again the old timers found certain significance in what would remain another unsolved case. It was obvious that Wendy Jessel had hooked up with the wrong John somewhere around Hobbs Lane, which since the mid 60's had been Ariana's most notorious high crime area. The fact that she was a descendent of the first person to ever commit murder in Ariana was not lost on the old timers, nor

was the slight irony that she had been beaten and that her body had been dumped in a ditch full of shallow water a little over 100 years after Otis Jessel had beaten and murdered Miriam Lovecraft, dumping her body in Hollow Creek.

It had happened before and it was happening again.

-13-

On Sunday, November 18, former Ariana Police Chief Patrick Holland called in to complain that he had someone trying to play an apparent practical joke on him. According to his statement, he and his wife, Myra, were awakened just after midnight by the sound of someone scraping something against the side of their trailer on Ellie Road, near the extreme southern boundary of the Ariana City Limits, followed by the sounds of heavy breathing and grunting. As his wife waited inside he had taken his shotgun and went outside to investigate before calling it in to the police station.

According to Holland, he had walked around behind his trailer, but saw no one. He shined his light into the woods which sat off from his lot and again saw no signs of anyone. However, Holland did have the strong feeling that he was being observed by some party unseen. Then, once he had begun walking around to the other side of the trailer he heard footsteps coming from the direction of the woods. He stopped to shine his light into the woods and the sound of footsteps stopped as well. Again he could not see any sign of anyone in the woods. Holland continued back to going to the other side of his trailer, and as soon as he did the sound of mocking footsteps began again. The starting and stopping of the sound of footsteps with his "prankster" continued until he decided to reenter his trailer and phone the department. As he had paused at the door the mirroring footfalls in the woods had stopped as well. The wind had picked up briefly, blowing across his ears. As it died down Holland claimed he heard the sound of several whispering voices laughing from the direction of the woods behind his house.

Police Chief Jonard Sink and Officer Frank Hawkins had come to the Holland property on Ellie Road and walked around the outside of

the trailer, and a little way into the small wooded area behind the house accompanied by Holland. The three men found no evidence of anyone or anything suspicious, and again Holland himself chalked it up to being a prank. However, later on, in the early morning hours, after Sink and Hawkins had left the property on Ellie Road, the Hollands were again awakened by the sounds of scarping, grunting and heavy breathing on the outside wall of their bedroom. Holland went out again, and again he saw no one, but with each of his steps he could hear an unseen individual mirroring his footsteps in the darkness. This time, as he had cautiously made his way back to the front of his trailer, the wind shifted, bringing the smell of a hideously foul odor to his nose. Holland had hurried his steps as the mocking footsteps had stopped, replaced by a low and throaty growl from the woods. After the sun had come up he had called the department again, and Jonard Sink had returned, this time with Officer William Fronton. On the ground outside the Holland's bedroom they had found three bare footprints that measured nearly 18 inches from the heel to the big toe.

A few weeks later, late on the night of Saturday, December 8, another call had come in from Ellie Road, this time from Ryan Stanfield, who lived a quarter of a mile from the Hollands and another quarter mile from the beginning of Ellie Road. According to his statement Stanfield and his live-in girlfriend, Sheila Wells, had just gotten back from seeing *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* at the Sun Acres Boulevard Triple and were relaxing on the couch with a couple of beers discussing the movie when there was a loud bang at the end of the trailer, followed by a yell unlike any sound they had ever heard before. Stanfield had went to the door, opening it a crack and calling out. Standing just behind his car was a tall figure looking back toward the house. It had yelled out again, and Stanfield had closed the door at Wells' urging.

Sure that it was the *"Skunk Ape Bigfoot"* that had been sighted all through the summer Stanfield had gotten his gun as Wells had called the Ariana Police Department. Outside the trailer Stanfield had quickly walked around the perimeter but found no sign of the Bigfoot. As he started moving back toward the trailer, however, he

realized that he heard the sound of footsteps other than his own. He had stopped, swinging his flashlight in a slow arc, and as he did he could see no sign of the creature. Cautiously he took a step, and at that moment he heard the sound of footsteps coming from the woods that were on the side boundary of the two acres which his trailer sat on. Stanfield made a dash for the door, getting inside and locking it behind him without bothering to listen to see if his footsteps were being echoed, or if the Bigfoot was hot on his heels as he ran back to the sanctuary of his home. Neither Stanfield nor Wells went near the doors or windows until Officers William Fronton and Harry Brickman arrived on the scene.

Additionally, as Wells had gotten off the phone with Ariana Police Department Dispatcher Allie Silverman another call had come in. Christina Palmer, a resident of Ellie Road who lived between Stanfield and the Hollands, called to say that she and her husband, Lee, had been awakened by the sound of strange screams in the night. When questioned about the incident, neither Stanfield and Wells, nor the Palmers, claimed to have known about the incident at the Hollands' a few weeks previously.

After that night in early December the Hollow Creek Monster once again disappeared, seemingly to whatever lair it was believed to have in the Big Green Swamp at the northern end of Ariana and Poe County. On the cusp of a new year and a new decade some people speculated that the Monster would probably disappear again for a long time, perhaps to return in time for the 200th anniversary of the founding of Ariana. However, the Hollow Creek Monster would make its next appearance, building toward its final violent and murderous rampage within less than ten years time.

-14-

Tuesday, May 31, 1988

It was getting dark. Seen through the breaks in the canopy created by pines and live oaks festooned with Spanish moss the sky

had turned from blue, to a pale yellow, to an orange which caused the fluffy white clouds to turn purple and wispy, to a light purple which made the clouds look black and as heavy as thunderclouds. There was an unseasonable chill in the air, and the coolness was a far cry from the heat that should have heralded the beginning of the summer.

The chill was further intensified as a sudden gust picked up, and Veronica Bates closed her eyes and arched her back slightly, making a not too displeased moan when her exposed nipples stung as they grew harder in the chill. Her leg jerked and she felt her toe briefly touch something that was freezing and made of thin metal. There was a slightly hollow twang as she drew her foot back, and she knew that she had knocked her beer can over. With a giggle she quickly sat up, shrugging Donny's hand off her shoulder as she threw an arm over her exposed breasts and reached down to retrieve the Budweiser can before what little of its contents that were left spilled out onto the ground.

Despite her slightly drunken giddiness Veronica found herself feeling a little uneasy as she drew her naked legs up and adjusted her ass on the blanket. The 18 year old, day and a half away from being a graduate of Sun Acres High School, had at first been excited at the prospect of doing it out in the open and getting all back to nature in the woods. Even the name of the place her boyfriend, Donny Stratton, had suggested going, the Ghost's Woods, sounded forbidden and a little scary, but not too scary. In fact, on the drive out, she had thought of it as arousing scary. Although the truth was, at first, as they had left the car parked on the side of the road and begun to make their way into the woods it had not seemed very scary at all. In fact it looked like some kind of stoned Johnny Appleseed had went insane, planting whatever kind of trees he wanted anywhere. Once inside the tree line, what had looked like a forest of pines ended up having spidery live oaks, palmettos, orange trees and the occasional, lonely, palm tree mixed in.

The only thing was that they had not stopped at what she thought was the first suitable spot. Donny had lead them a little deeper, and then a little more deeper into the woods until he found

a fairly level depression with a carpet of fallen leaves and pine needles that seemed devoid of the spiny palmettos and little shrubs that grew from the forest floor between the bigger trees. Veronica had been sure that it was much later than it felt as she had helped him spread out the old picnic blanket he had scrounged from his parents' garage. The sun had been high in the sky though, and surely once they were finished there would still be plenty of light and they would find their way back to the road and the car with no problem.

As she took the last swallow of the Bud she listened to the sounds of the forest. A few birds called here and there, mainly the cackling of crows. There was also a disharmonious chorus of crickets and frogs who, like them, were braving the unseasonable coolness. Every few minutes it seemed like bullfrogs in the distance were making their big, fart noise, mating calls. It was different from what she knew, as for Veronica it was her first trip into the woods. The closest she had ever come to the outdoors was being in a production of *Down By The Creek Bank* in Sunday School when she had been in the 1st grade. A sudden gust blew and she had to use her free hand to brush errant strands of her brown hair away from the corner of her mouth.

Veronica suddenly yelped as Donny sat up beside her, digging the tips of his fingers into each of her bony sides as he tickled her roughly. She snorted and laughed despite the slight pain his jabbing fingers caused. The last mouthful of beer she had spilled out of her mouth, dripping off her chin and into the hollow of her breasts. As his tickling intensified she unceremoniously flung the can away, just catching the sound of it touching down among the carpet of needles.

"What are you covering your boobs for?" Donny asked, his tone somewhat whimsical. "No one is going to see them out here. And if they did they already got a pretty good show."

"Fuckin' ass," she laughed as she twisted away from him, bringing herself as close to the edge of the blanket as she could. Veronica made a sweeping motion with her arm to indicate the Budweiser can that was sitting at an angle so high it was almost

sitting on its top in the leaf litter. "You made me waste the last of it."

Donny just adjusted himself so that he was a little closer to her, his warm buttocks touching hers. She looked to him as he flashed his little bad boy smile that she had always thought of as kind of a turn on because it made him look mischievous, which his was, and a little mysterious, which he tried at but it usually came out as being slightly creepy. He still had a lusty gleam in his pale blue eyes, and his short and big blonde curls looked as if they had been roughed up, highly disheveled. It was all an effect that made him look hot and sexy enough to make Veronica want to go again.

"There's more back at the car," Donny said, moving closer and working to get a hand down between her legs.

"It's going to be too fucking dark by the time we get back." *If we can get back in the dark*, she added in thought. Again she didn't think they would be going as far into the woods as they did.

"Oh, just relax," Donny said. He lightly rubbed the tips of his fingers along her moist and matted pubic hair, then pushed them closer to run them over her nether lips. "Two more days and we're home free."

Veronica relaxed her knees and let out a slight sigh as he teased her along the outside. She opened herself for him, letting her heels slip off the edge of the blanket and into the cool and stiff pine needles as she gave him just enough room to work.

Two more days. Two more days until school was out, for them, for good. Two more days and then they could move off on their own and get ready to ditch Sun Acres.

"Ready to do it again?" Donny asked, his voice full of mischief.

"Ummm," Veronica found herself purring. She smiled as he managed to slip a finger into her and pushed it nice and deep. "It's getting dark."

"So?"

"We don't have a flashlight." She closed her eyes and sighed slightly. His short jabs were not the best fingering she had ever gotten, but it still felt good, enough to make her want a little more of something else up there.

"I can find my way in the dark," Donny assured her, rising up on his knees. He moved over slightly, giving her room to move back toward the center of the blanket, all while doing his best to keep his finger inside of her. Veronica shrugged away from him anyway, then rolled onto her stomach and raised her ass as she brought the lower half of her body up on her knees. Once she was in a good position Donny took his fingers and traced the lips of her fur surrounded hole.

"I know, *you can find your way in the dark*," Veronica laughed. "But what about getting back to the car?"

Donny pushed his finger all the way in again and laid himself down on top of her. He kissed her below the ear and then on the cheek. "I can get us back to the car," he whispered, doing his best to sound seductive, confident and self-assured. "There's nothing in the woods that can get us." He took his finger out, and just as quickly replaced it with two, giving her several hard and deep jabs. "Unless you believe *the stories*," he panted

Veronica's head was swimming as she raised it slightly off the blanket. Donny knew just what to do to get her going. He was so good that it took a second to realize what he had just added. "What stories?"

"You never heard?" he asked, not missing a stroke.

"No," she replied, pushing back against him and raising her buttocks again slightly, opening herself for him a little more.

"It's 'cause you came from out of state and always lived at the north end of Sun Acres and not down around Ariana," he said, still not changing his pace. "You've never heard of the Hollow Creek Monster."

Veronica found that, even though his magic fingers were so good, she couldn't help but laugh. "The Hollow Creek Monster?"

Hollow Creek Monster? How lame.

"Yeah," Donny whispered, kissing her ear. "It's like Bigfoot or something."

A smile on her face Veronica arched her back so she could bring her cheek up against his. "Bigfoot isn't a bad guy from what I hear," she sighed. Like Becky "Willow" Powell she had come from

Pennsylvania with her parents and had only lived in Florida for the past five years. And as Donny suggested she had stayed in the northern end of Sun Acres the whole time, barely ever going to the malls in Lake Parker and only going as close as the Sun Acres Boulevard Triple to Ariana. Until that day she had never heard of the Ghost's Woods and was only now hearing anything about the *"Hollow Creek Monster"*. She did her best not to laugh again.

Donny took her rubbing back against him as a cue and took his fingers out of her. "Well, *this* Bigfoot *is*."

Veronica raised her rear higher and pushed her knees further apart as she felt him position himself behind her. She let out a hiss as he penetrated her once again, and cooed as he started to work himself in and out of her. "What makes him so bad?" she asked, gasping in a girlish-seductive tone.

"They say if you see it, and you look into its eyes you're doomed."

"*Doomed*?" Veronica snickered.

"Doomed to a horrible death," Donny grunted. He was already sweating again. "That is if you get away from it at all."

"The Hollow Creek Monster," she laughed again. "I think Hollow Creek is *down there*."

"Uh! Yeah?!" Donny groaned, immediately picking up on what she was suggesting.

"And the *monster* is in th*e creek* right now," she panted.

Donny gave her several hard thrusts and was more than a little excited when she gasped and moaned.

"Give me *the monster*," Veronica panted, bucking back against Donny's thrust. "*Flood the creek, baby*. Flood it up *fuckin' good*!"

"Damn, yeah!" he replied, pounding her harder.

Veronica gasped and panted, pushing back against him as he thrust into her. She stretched back looking into the woods, though not really registering what was ahead of her for several moments. That was until a slight movement caught her eye. "Donny," she said, keeping her voice in a hushed, yet normal tone.

"Yeah, babe?" he panted, still not missing a stroke as he thrust his stiff cock into her.

"Look at that."

Donny slowed his pace slightly and looked up, following the direction of her gaze. In the dusky light there was a glow over the top of the trees. It seemed to make a slow circle and then move away from them in the opposite direction, disappearing deeper in the woods.

"What the hell was that?"

"I don't know," Donny told her. He placed his hands on her waist and picked his former pace back up. "Like a helicopter light or something."

"I didn't hear a helicopter," Veronica whispered. Listening the only sounds she could hear were of crickets and frogs, and a couple of birds here and there, what she assumed were normal sounds of the woods, and they were the same sounds she had been hearing since they had gotten out of the car.

Donny made a guttural moan, giving her a couple of hard, body rocking, thrust. "It's too noisy to hear," he suggested.

"*Oh, fuck yeah*!" Veronica yelped. She lowered her head and rested her cheek back on the blanket as he gave it to her harder. She panted and moaned along with him, truly drowning out the noises of the *woodland creatures*, and for several minutes forgetting about local legends and helicopter lights.

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Once they had finally finished it was full dark. The couple had rested against each other for several minutes before fumbling around in the darkness to find each other's clothes and gathering up the blanket. When they were sure they had everything they needed Donny lead the way into the woods, and once the giddiness of passion had finally faded away Veronica cursed him for not bringing a flashlight.

The frogs and crickets had gotten louder, and the mosquitoes were now out in full force. Every few minutes one of them interrupted the chorus of cheeps and chirps by slapping a biting bug that had found its mark. To make things worse there was no

breeze, and the air in the woods seemed to be stifling. Veronica felt sweaty and sticky all over, and she quickly found herself wishing for that unseasonable coldness to return and find them once again. Eventually she removed her school jacket and tied the sleeves around her waist so she would not have to carry it on top of the blanket.

"Five more minutes and we're at the car," Donny told her.

"You said that 15 minutes ago," she complained. "You might as well admit that we're lost. In *the woods*. In *the dark*. Without a *fucking* flashlight!"

"Jesus, stop bitching!" he barked back. "I said I was sorry I didn't bring the *fucking* flashlight. I've already said, sorry. Get the fuck off my back about it."

They walked on in silence for several minutes after that. The moon was enough to let them see where the trees were, but not enough to give them the view of a clear path. Every other step revealed a fallen branch, or a root, or a dip in the ground or the scraping edge of a palmetto frond.

As they walked along Veronica began to hum, then sing, Poison's *'Nothin' But A Good Time'* to herself. She did her best to concentrate on the song, and a little on how hot Bret Michaels looked. She imagined herself lost in the woods with him instead of Donny. At least, she was sure, that if she were lost in the woods at night with Bret Michaels he would have brought a flashlight. This thought made her snicker to herself.

"What's so funny?" Donny asked as he walked ahead of her.

"Nothing," she replied. *But a good time*, she added in thought, snickering a little more.

Veronica opened her mouth to sing another chorus when she suddenly felt the palm of Donny's hand stiff and flat against her chest. She stopped and looked around him to try and see what was ahead of them. "What is it?"

"The creek," Donny said.

"The creek?" Her eyes adjusted in the direction he was looking and she could see that the woods cleared a couple hundred yards ahead or them. Beyond that was a clam and thin ribbon of water

that would have been invisible if it wasn't for the reflection of the moon and stars on its surface.

"Damn, I really got us turned around. We had to have gone in a circle somewhere. We have to go back."

"Why?" She looked at him in the dark, barely able to make out the contours of his face. "The creek and the road cross at that bridge down the road from where we parked. If we go back that way and follow the creek we'll find the road."

"No way," he said, shaking his head. "We can't follow the creek."

"Why not?" As soon as she asked the question she realized that she already had the answer. "Because it's *Hollow Creek*."

"Yeah."

Veronica snickered, making a snorting sound in her nose, which then turned into a full fledged laugh. "Oh, God. You believe that shit you were telling me earlier about Bigfoot?"

"It never goes far from the creek."

"Yeah," she nodded. "I get it. Hence the name *Hollow Creek Monster.*" In the darkness she punctuated the Monster's name with air-quotes. "Oooooh."

"It ain't funny, Veronica!" Donny's voice was sharp and panicked.

Another mosquito landed on her lower left arm at that moment. As soon as she felt the stinging prick of its bite she slapped it. The sound was like a gunshot, echoing into the woods. This made her look toward her boyfriend with a smile on her face. "It's not like it's going to sneak up and get you. Did you hear that? It's so quiet-"

Veronica stopped speaking and found herself standing in uneasy silence as her mouth began to go dry. It was quiet. There was no other sound in the woods. The crickets and the frogs had all stopped their songs. There was no wind. Even the sound of the creek didn't carry far enough to reach them.

"Fuck!" Donny cried in a whisper. He stepped closer to her. "It's out there."

"No," she said, her own voice low and nervous. "You're just freaking out a little."

"It's out there," he repeated. "I can smell it."

Veronica slipped her arms around Donny as they stood, still in the same spot. Her eyes scanned the darkness, but the only things she could make out were trees. She realized that she could detect a faint smell in the stagnant air. It was an unfamiliar, musky odor. After a moment it seemed stronger, and more rank.

"*You shouldn't be out here, Veronica*," a low voice seemed to whisper from some faraway place.

"Oh, shit," Donny wheezed.

Veronica quickly realized, her blood suddenly burning, that the voice she had just heard was not in her head, because Donny had heard it too.

"*Fuckin' around in the woods, Donny-wonny*," a second whispering voice added.

"*Not a good idea*," said a third.

"Who the fuck are they?" Donny cried. "Where are they?"

Holding tightly to him Veronica looked around, seeing no sign of the owners of the voices. Then, as she turned to face the creek she saw them, a pair of eyes looking out from the tree-line. Veronica was terrified, not because they were the red or yellow eyes of a wild beast, or because they were the glowing eyes of some night creature, but because, even at the distance they were from her, she found them to be all too hauntingly human.

"Donny!"

"Oh, God," he sputtered upon seeing it. "It's looking at us."

The couple stood together, frozen in a death tight embrace. The owner of those all too human eyes took a step in their direction, revealing a tall, hairy shape silhouetted in the moonlight. It wasn't until it threw its head back and let out an unearthly wail like neither of them had ever heard before, that they released each other and began to run into the darkness. Veronica let go of the blanket, her mind barely registering the fact that on the tree closest to her someone had apparently nailed a cross. Not daring to look back and veering off from the direction they had come in, she found herself

widening the gap between herself and her boyfriend, as the Hollow Creek Monster unleashed a second, unearthly screech.

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It had happened before and, as the old timers and locals say, it was happening again.

THE END

ABOUT THE STORY

There are stories that come easy. You sit down with an idea in your head and write, and between a few hours and a couple of weeks you've gone from start to finish and end up with a story that you're pretty satisfied with. Then there are those that take the long way around. Those are the stories that start off with the same amount of initial ideas, and after you work on and off of them for a decade you're ready to start a new revision or draft.

As a for instance, it's one day past my 40th birthday, January 7, 2012, and here I sit with what I feel is the definitive beginning of a much longer work that I began back in December 1989. Yeah, 23 years to get to the start? Have I ever mentioned that I have OCD, and it's very heavy on an obsession with perfection?

In 1989 I sat down with a black pen and a five subject notebook with the deliberate intention of writing my first novel length story. I had a beginning and an end, a sweet prologue with what I felt was the most killer hook line, and a target length around 500 pages. I thought it was going to take me about a month to write. HA, HA!

Five years, two notebooks and over 1,300 typed pages later the novel, titled *Whispers Of Darkness*, was finally finished. It was a long and epic tale which had it all, including some of the most disturbing things I have ever written. It was open for a part two, but yet…

Well, but yet, as I reread that *"final draft"* I really began to feel that something was missing. In the years since I had started writing it *Whispers Of Darkness* had evolved from a simple and basic horror story and into the story of the darker side of life in a small southern town. The story itself began several months into "the horror". What I felt it was missing was a beginning, a place to spell out the events which revealed the start of that horror.

In the spring and summer of 1997 I wrote the second novel (which was at the time the chronological first novel) *The Echoes Of Yesterday*. In that novel I expanded on the initial story and characters, as well as adding several new characters who had to be written out by the novel's end, and did what I had sat out to do (which was to write the story from the beginning).

In early 1999 I wrote the first few hundred pages of a third novel *The Reconstruction*, which immediately takes places following the events of *Whispers Of Darkness*. Aside from the fact that I was about to be derailed due to a train wreck in my personal life I had something else bothering me, a little nagging that told me that I still had not gone far enough back. Initially I did my best to work it out in my head. I didn't feel there was anything else I could add to the story to give it a more grounded beginning, other than focusing on events that had nothing to do with the main action within the first two novels.

Divorced, back home, and with time to think in 2000 I really pondered over the fact that, as much as anything else, this novel series was about the life and the hidden secrets of a small town. For the next several years I had several false starts on drafts of novels and short stories that would more firmly bring this epic story in my head a true beginning. Titled tentatively *The Gathering Storm* and *The Oncoming Storm* none of these drafts gathered much steam, as I easily saw they lacked the mystery and foreboding of the other novels. In short everything I wrote looked pretty bland and stale.

Then, in 2007, while taking a break from working on the story that would become *Heather's Journey: The Sound Of her MASTER'S VOICE* a new idea occurred to me. The biggest problem I had was that I was limiting myself, trying to write another prequel that would match up some way to what I had written previously. The only true way to escape this pattern would be to start from scratch, tear down the first two and a quarter novels, notes and various short story drafts, and rework the story from what should be its beginning and writing forward until its ultimate end. I wrote an all new, 100 plus page, draft for "*The Oncoming Storm*", then let the story go cold for a couple of more years.

Last year I sat down and tore that draft apart, and as I wrote I really began to feel that I had at last found my starting point for the story of Ariana, Florida. After having several tentative names throughout the years I began to call the series *Shadows Of The Night*. *The Oncoming Storm* became *Comes The Dark Storm* in the latest draft, and at last I had nailed down a starting point which I was confident would need no revision.

There was a problem though. The prologue. In it I decided to give a long and drawn out history. Initially the last couple of scenes in the preceding story, featuring Veronica Bates and Donny Stratton, were the prologue for *The Oncoming Storm*, however they had that *"well here it is, I'm throwing you right into the story"* quality that I had attempted to expunge for the previous novels by writing hundreds of pages of prequel.

The revised prologue, as presented here, went back to establish the history of the town from its founding until the erstwhile present, and at last gave me that closure on the beginning that I had struggled with for so long. Unfortunately it didn't fit in with the narrative of the remainder of the novel or the series, which covers the events of several months at a steady pace without any jumping too far between one date to the next. So, after thinking it over for several months I decided to remove the prologue from the novel and present it as a stand alone short story detailing the early history of Ariana and leaving it as a jumping off point to the beginning of *Comes The Dark Storm*.

Legend Of The Ghost's Woods is filled with information that's good to know, and believe me, nothing in it, no matter how unrelated it might seem to the rest of it, is throwaway information. I don't really want to giveaway anything that is going to unfold through *Comes The Dark Storm* (and it's why I've given no details as to what the initial novels were about here), but I will say that the mystery of the missing police chief and heiress and the story of the two people who knew what happened will be central to *Comes The Dark Storm*'s story and overall mystery.

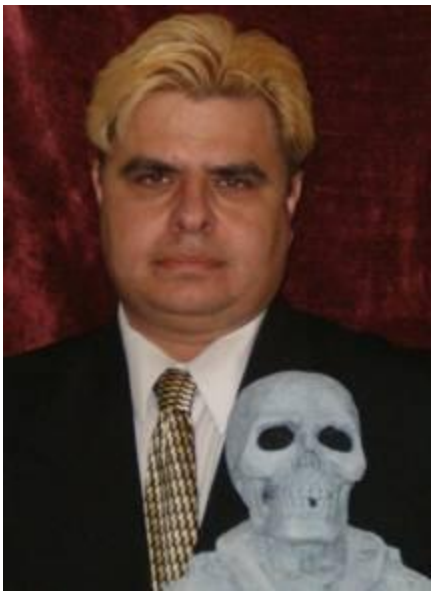
Around 18 years ago I wanted more than anything to publish *Whispers Of Darkness*, and for the longest time I imagined that it

would be one of the first stories that I would ever publish. Luckily, I suppose, my own obsessiveness got in the way. Once it's written again I know the story will be far superior to the one I initially conceived and wrote. I have often looked at OCD as a sickness with a purpose, and this is at least one case where that purpose has actually served me well.

Now, since I've been good and ambiguous since I don't want to give anything away, where do you, dear reader get to go from here? *Legend Of The Ghost's Woods* is admittedly a taste of a much longer piece of work, which at the moment is only partially written. My aim is for mid-2013 for a release date for *Comes The Dark Storm*, and if you indeed liked the preceding story and are wanting more then I promise to do my best to make sure that it was well worth the wait.

Michael C. Laney
Davenport, Florida
January 7, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Michael C. Laney is from Auburndale, Florida, which serves as the basis for his fictional Ariana, Florida. He currently resides in Davenport, Florida, with his wife, Betsy, his son, Quentin, and their five cats, Callie, Socks, Meeko, Usagi and Buttercup. His oldest son, Alex, attends school out of state. *Legend Of The Ghost's Woods* serves as the prologue for the first of his forthcoming *Shadows Of The Night* novels, *Comes The Dark Storm*.

Michael writes in several genres, including horror and erotica. He is the author of the novels *Heather's Journey: The Sound Of her MASTER'S VOICE* and *A Day In The Life Of Abagail King*, as well as the horror story and poetry collections *A Letter To Doctor Freudstein - Demoni - And Ten Poems* and *Frog Nog And Other Horrorday Tales*. He hopes to release his first horror novel, *The Creeper*, by the end of the summer.

He talks about writing, gives reviews and occasionally rants and raves on his blog House Of Master Vyle.

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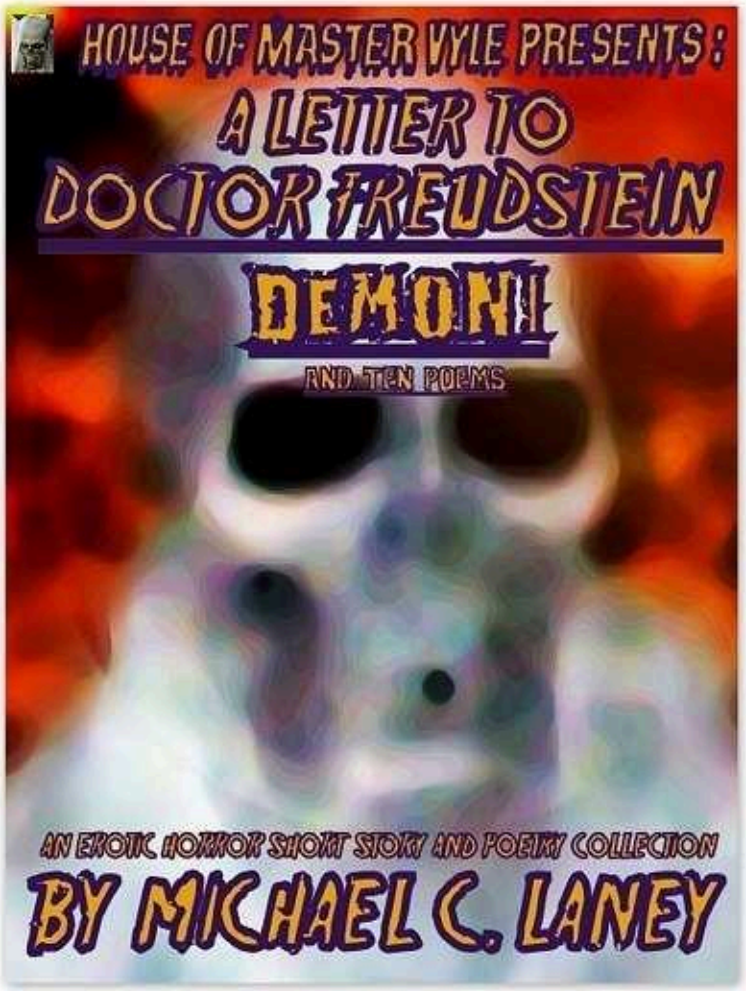

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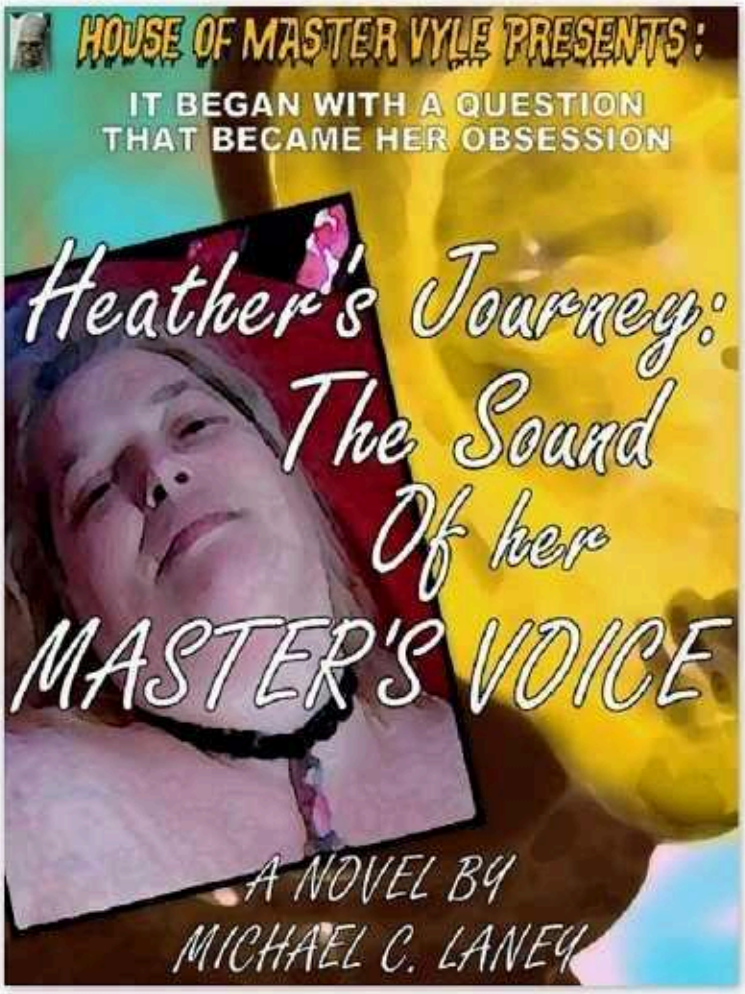

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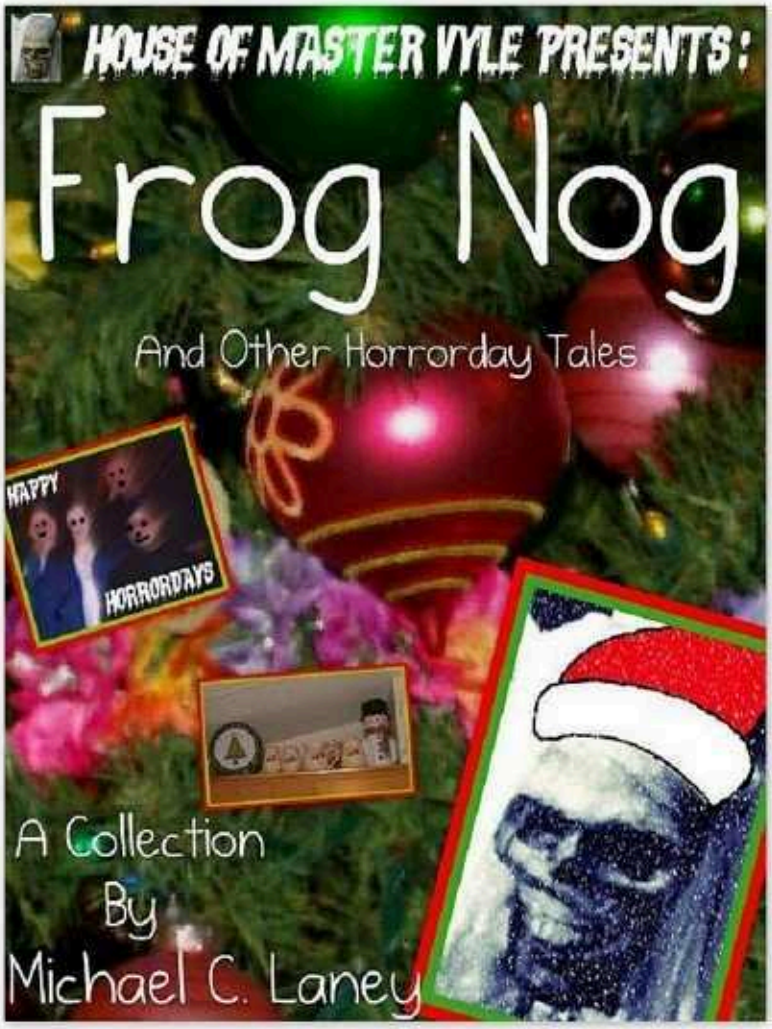

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